

Officials look for funds to fill ambulance fee gap

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Montgomery County officials can't agree on how to cover the funding gap that the defeated ambulance fee was supposed to fill.

When voters overwhelmingly spiked the fee on Election Day, they essentially created a \$12.5 million hole in the county's already depleted budget.

County Executive Ike Leggett, while campaigning for the fee, said 87 firefighters would be handed pink slips, nearly a dozen police officers removed from schools and senior services slashed if voters blocked his proposal.

But the dire warnings didn't deter about 54 percent of county voters.

And County Council members, who must fill the gap immediately, are unsure about where -- or how difficult it will be -- to find the money.

"I think that this whole fret is just hyperbole," said Councilwoman Valerie Ervin, D-Silver Spring. "I don't believe we have to do any of these draconian cuts that the executive claimed we would."

County officials are anticipating favorable tax returns around Thanksgiving, which Ervin said could be used to offset the new gap.

But Councilman Marc Elrich, D-at large, who voted for the fee, said it won't be so easy.

"There's no free lunch," he said. "We're going to have to lay off workers or cut services. It's not like we're going to save that much just by cutting back on how much paper we use. I haven't seen any ideas from the four [council members] who voted against this."

Opponents of the fee were reluctant to identify any new cuts until they see the new tax numbers, but Councilman Phil Andrews, D-

Gaithersburg/Rockville, said a good start would be to crack down on taxpayer money used for campaign literature.

Executive officials pumped public money into tens of thousands of fliers and posters promoting the fees and deployed fire trucks and uniformed public safety officials to polling stations Tuesday. They have been unable to provide *The Washington Examiner* with spending estimates for the effort.

However, Andrews said he will introduce legislation that would prevent any tax dollars from being spent on referendum campaigns.

Funding shortfalls are nothing new for the county. Officials spent much of the summer filling a \$1 billion budget gap -- the largest deficit in the suburb's history -- and Leggett has told department heads to prepare for 15 percent budget cuts next fiscal year.